

THE CYCLONE

How Lon Baxter, Pioneer, Confronted the Fate of Lovers Who Wait Too Long.

THE sun, dwarfed to a hard red ball, had dropped behind the level, sharp-cut line where sky and prairie stopped. Grain fields lay spread out, a dark, flat monotone under a sheet of cold, gray cloud. Close reeded poplars shivered sibilantly in a chill breeze. Yet the boy and girl, merged into one dim blot on the steps of the shallow porch, in front of a big, square, mud tinted house, were caught into a romance world as soft and warm and entrancingly beautiful as love ever finds.

But, presently, Lon Baxter broke its spell. "I can't ask you to marry me, yet, Edna—not until I have a home ready. If you will wait—"

"Oh, Lon," Edna came back to Grindon, Iowa, with protest in her luminous face. "Why should we wait for that? Why shouldn't I do my share in making the home?"

"Because I will never let my wife go through what my mother did. I can never get away from that— The boyish face, already shadowed by pain-breeding experience, set in hard lines. "I can see it now—the day she died. The little bedroom off the kitchen like an even—she'd cooked for threshers all day—and her gasping and fighting for breath! And my father bending over, twisting her hands and moaning. 'It's the old-time mor'gaga that's killed her!'"

Bitting tears stood in the boy's eyes. Not even the clasp of Edna's tender hands, the brush of her fresh cheek, could take the sting from that memory. The rasping chant of frogs filled their ears; moonless dark wrapped them close; for the first time, Lon's brooding passion found speech:

"I hated that mortgage as if it was a living thing! I wanted to tear it—to torture it like a cat does a mouse! I hated my father, too. He always worked like a horse—you know, Edna—and he expected me and my mother—sometimes I felt that he was downright cruel."

The wisdom of womanhood was strong in Edna, though she was but eighteen. She knew words would draw out buried bitterness. Gently she led him on to speak.

"Only the year after ma died he came home one night and showed us children a long, dirty paper, covered with figures and blots. It was the mortgage, he said. The last cent was paid. He lifted the stove lid and dropped it on to the coals and we all stood by and watched it burn. Then he almost whispered, 'I wish mother could see that! I couldn't hold in them. I told him I'd never mortgage anything of mine—I'd die first. And the old man sat down and spoke quiet—almost as if he was apologizing to ma—said he borrowed money first when ma was sick and had to have a doctor, and medicine, and nourishing food. Then the grasshoppers come three years running, and he had to borrow to keep us all from starving and freezing, and after that, little Bummy died and that meant another loan. I could see—there hadn't been nothing else for him to do. I hadn't ought to have blamed him so—and— I did feel different after that—"

His voice was hard with determination. "But I made up my mind right then that I'd never let myself be trapped the way he was. I'd never have a wife and children until I was fixed so I'd never need to borrow—or mortgage—"

With the sweet, clear sense that was hers Edna spoke:

"Yes, Lon. But that can't be, you know. Things happen, good and bad, and married folks just have to take the chances together."

"A man ought to have his farm clear and a comfortable house before he asks a woman to begin to take chances," Lon, boy-sure, pronounced.

"That will take a long time—years, perhaps," Edna's voice had lost some of its joy tiff.

"No, I am young and strong, and I can work. God, how I'll work for you, Edna!" "I know. I understand how you feel," she admitted. "But," shyly, "I am young and strong, too, Lon. And I am not afraid of work, either—with you."

His arms tight about her, hope and gladness pulsing high in the swift rebound of youth, he told her confidently.

"There'll be work enough for you when I have the farm and the house ready—that won't be long."

Brave words—easily said.

But how were these words to be made good? That was the question with which young Baxter wrestled all through the rushing days of harvesting and threshing the crops of Edna's father—he was only a hired man on the Goodrich place. How was he to secure a farm of his own? How was he to prepare a home fit for Edna Goodrich—he, with only his two hands and the great urge of love in his heart? The problem was in his mind when he dropped into the deep sleep compelled by long days of hard work, and it was with him when he tumbled into his clothes in the pale light of early dawn. In their snatches of talk at noontime and after the chores were done he and Edna discussed it.

They knew well that "ol' man Goodrich," who was popularly called "the richest, the mightiest, and the meanest man in four counties," would never give his consent to Lon as a son-in-law. As children, in the little white schoolhouse on the corner of "24," Lon and Edna had spelled one another down and figured the same sums on their scratched slates. As a boy and girl, Lon had seen Edna home from evening services, crowded



"It's gone over." His voice was wavery. "It's gone toward home?" she questioned anxiously.



her to the skating rink and church socials. Only the girl's own tact, with friendly connivance on the part of "ma Goodrich," had kept "pa" from discovering what every one else knew—that "Lon Baxter was gone" with Edna Goodrich.

It was in sheer bravado that the boy had offered his services to Goodrich. His own father, to the amazement of his son, his neighbors, and, very possibly, of himself, had suddenly married the Widow Grimes, who came in occasionally to "red up" and do the family mending. Lon, though he saw that his father and the younger children were sorely in need of a woman's hand, resented the presence of the new wife as a desecration of his mother's memory. With a taciturn understanding, Sam Baxter spoke:

"Ye worked well for ma, Lon, in the days when I needed help the most. Ye shall have your time from now on—an' this'll give ye a start," he put a hundred dollars into the boy's hands. "Don't throw it away!"

Lon had worked his way through high school—Edna was attending it, too. Then he had hunted a job. The unsuspecting Goodrich, blind through selfishness, thinking only of the sturdy brawn of the lad who had done a man's work since his tenth year, hired the young man at once. Twenty-five dollars a month seemed, at first, a fortune to Lon, who had worked so many years at home for his "keeps." Yet, it was such a joy to live under the same roof with Edna that he would gladly have labored for that alone—had the "ol' man" but known it. And now, before the summer had fairly begun, Lon had spoken his love and Edna confessed hers.

"We won't say anything to any one but mother," Edna decided. "Of course, pa'll object."

"Yes, I s'pose he will," Lon agreed. "But he'll have to give in, when he sees that I am going to give you a good home and living."

Still, as the months slipped by, Lon began to realize that it would take years as a hired man to save money enough to buy a good farm in their own neighborhood. "And I won't buy on time—that would mean a mortgage," he declared. "And renting is just putting money in the other fellow's pockets," he finished with a sober face.

"Yes," Edna answered. "Still, if crops were good, we'd save something, too, wouldn't we?"

"I tell you, Edna," Lon spoke with sudden decision, "I've about made up my mind that I'll have to go to a newer country—there's good government land, yet, in Dakota and Nebraska—I'll just have to do what our fathers did, strike out and pioneer."

"And I'll go alone," she cried eagerly. "Our mothers pioneered, too," she reminded him, thinking only of her own strong, brave-spirited mother.

His face darkened. "Yes, they did. And it killed my mother. No, Edna, you must stay here and wait until I get a good start."

All through the long winter months they studied the possibilities and made plans. Lon was buoyantly confident now. He would locate a good homestead—a crop, or at most two crops, would build the house—then—And Edna, with wistful eyes, listened and suggested and gave him the encouragement of her love and faith.

One Sunday afternoon, when he found his father alone, feet upon the stove-hearth, paper and pipe finished, Lon—with a yearning for the sympathy of his own—hastily flung out his new purpose and its reason.

The response was a surprise—a revelation, indeed. "So, ye've picked of 'ol' man Goodrich for a father-in-law?" Sam Baxter chuckled under his tongue. "Well, ye must think a heap of the girl. But, ye've right. Ye'll have to go out to Dakota an' take your own

at pioneer's in a new country. There'll be hardships—but there's advantages, too. I can't do what I'd like for ye, Lonnie," his rough voice softened. "But the roan colts is yours, ye know, an' they ain't a finer span in the country."

Lon's chair dropped to four feet. He had thought his father had forgotten a promise made long ago; to his mother.

"Then, there's the Toledo wagon—'tain't new, but it's in good condition. When your year is up, come home, Lon, and ye shan't start out empty-handed."

"I should say not," the youth exulted. "And when I sell my pigs, I'll have nigh four hundred dollars cash, too. I ought to make it all right!"

"Yes," the older man assented. "Ye'll have a fair start, an' ye've got a head on your shoulders. With the help of a good girl, like Edna, ye'll make it all right—I the Hand of God don't fall on ye, like it does on us in 'hopper times."

In the fullness of uptried courage the youngster asserted:

"I'll not take Edna's help until I have a good house ready for her—and I'll be ready for the 'hoppers,' too."

"Ye don't know much about wimmen, then—an'—ye can't forestall Natur', my boy," his father commented dryly.

But Lon was still certain of his own wisdom and ready to defy Nature herself.

When Goodrich, as spring approached, proposed a renewal of their contract for another year Lon told him:

"I have decided to go out to Dakota, Mr. Goodrich, and locate a homestead."

"Ye have? Well, that may be a good move," grudgingly, "fer a young fellow like you. Still there's lots of chances in farmin', ye know. Ye'd probably have more money at the end of the year staying right here at good wages and found. I'll hire ye, if ye want to stay—ye ain't so dum triffin' as most of the help nowadays."

Lon's tanned face reddened with pleasure. Even this acknowledgment from "ol' man Goodrich" was encouraging. On the strength of it he ventured:

"And, Mr. Goodrich, when I've got my land and a comfortable house on it I am coming back for Edna."

"Like 'hell ye are! The father sprang to his feet in a rage. "So—thit's it! That's the foolishness that's been going on right under my nose! Put it right out of your heads, I tell ye— Do you think I'll let my girl go out to Dakota to live in a sod hut and wash overalls? What do ye reckon I paid her school and music bills fer? She will stay right here with her parents until she marries a man that can give her a good livin' in a civilized country!"

"I'm not asking her to marry me until I can give her a good living," Lon spoke proudly.

"Ye'll both be gray headed before that time!"

"Pa'll never consent." "Ma Goodrich" said when Lon reported this interview. "Not that he has a thing against ye, Lonny, except that ye're poor. But as for me," with a consoling smile, "I never knew a finer woman

than your mother was—an' you are like her in ways—I ye are a boy."

When the time for the parting came it was harder than Lon had counted on. Now, at the last, he had to argue against his own heart cry as well as Edna's wistful eyes and unspoken plea.

"I couldn't bear to see you working too hard and, maybe, breaking down," he told her as he took her into the last embrace. "You know it's because I love you so much, Edna, that I can't—"

"Yes. But it seems wrong to me," she protested. "I'm ready—I want to help you get started, Lon. Our parents and our grandparents started out in life together, with nothing. Why should not we? When you find the right place then you'll let me come, won't you, Lon?"

"Just as soon as I can get a good crop and build a house I'll come back for you—maybe, with a wild hope, 'it'll be before next Christmas."

Traveling at the slow pace of farm horses, Lon spent three months in prospecting. He went through freezing nights, blinding rains, and teasing winds. He heard tales of poor crops and disappointing hopes—to say nothing of actual suffering. Yet on every hand he saw untilled lands, carrying untold promises in its virginity. At last he struck a claim that suited him—one hundred and sixty acres of flowing green, spattered with patches of brilliant wild flowers. A gentle slope would protect buildings from the north winds and a strip of slough was lush with waist high wild hay. It was August before he had cut and stacked an ample supply of hay for the coming winter and finished a dugout for himself and a shack for his team.

Then he turned the first sod. As he looked back down the long black bands that fell away from the plow he saw fields of grain, promising rich harvests—next year. He picked out the site for the house and set out rows of poplar switches to form a wind-break. And as he worked he visioned the home complete, with Edna waiting in the door for his homecoming—another year.

Long before he was ready for it the first blizzard stopped his work. One morning he awoke, shivering, the shrieking of the wind drowned his senses; swirling snow and frost laden windows dimmed daylight to thick fog. "It's come," Lon thought as he started a fire in his little cook stove. "I did hope it would hold off until I got to town again—I'm short on provisions, and coal, too."

He had seen blizzards back home; but he had never before been alone in one. Now, as his dugout walls trembled and the wild keening of the wind encompassed him, he was homesick and lonely.

"Sounds like all the wind in the world was trying to bust in that door," he muttered as he swallowed hot coffee and assured himself that it could not last long.

For three days he huddled over the stove and listened and waited, while the storm raged on with no signs of a let-up. To the lonesome, heartsick boy it seemed as though all the furies of hell had been turned loose upon that defenceless little sod hut. Over

and over again he assured himself that he was glad Edna was not here—that he would not have her pass through such an experience. And still, a long winter of storms here alone—how was he to stick it out?

On the fourth morning, when he opened his door, he looked upward to depth upon depth of blue stillness; he looked outward over billows of frost-crested snow, blinding in its glittering brilliance; and then he turned and saw a thread of smoke rising above the nearest cabin, two miles away, and his heart thrilled to the feel of human companionship.

After he had dug out his well and barn he harnessed his team and struck across fields to the Prossers—a young couple who had come from an eastern city the year before. They had known little of the difficulties to be overcome in homesteading a Dakota claim. The philosophic good cheer with which they met privations and discomforts had already won Lon's admiration. Today Molly was stinging as she set her one room in order, though she was still pale and confessed that she had stayed in bed during the storm. "With the covers over my head to keep out the roaring, Daniel, sitting in a nice warm den, with a few hens around, wasn't a circumstance to a Dakota blizzard?" she announced.

When the men had excavated the hayrack Molly joined them. The air was still sharp and the snowdrifts treacherous; yet the three turned the hay hauling into a frolic that Lon wished Edna might have shared. As he looked about at the homelike comfort Molly had created in the rough floored, mud walled room and remembered the awful loneliness of his own shack, resolution wavered. Another year of waiting alone seemed unbearable; perhaps his father and Edna were right, after all.

There were no more such fierce ordeals, but Lon spent many days shut in by cold and storm, thinking, as he twisted prairie hay into knots that burned fiercely—while they lasted—many thoughts. He knew that Edna would come to him if he but spoke the word. She, too, could make a home out of a dugout; she was better fitted for frontier life than Molly Prosser. Yet—visions of his mother's folded, toll worn hands, and recollections of her father's whiplash tongue mingled and jarred in his mind. And the terror of debt obsessed him. He could not speak the words that would bring Edna—and possible debt.

Almost before the frost was out of the ground the new homesteader was in the field with his plow. By the end of spring he had prepared and seeded nearly one hundred acres of ground. He and his team were alike hollow ribbed and jaded.—With exultant anticipation he watched his corn and wheat push through the soil, and began to count the returns they would bring. Once more he figured the cost of lumber, then sent the plans he had drawn to Edna, writing, "I'll come for you by next Christmas—be ready."

But as the season advanced cold, dry winds retarded growth; then a heavy hailstorm beat down the heading grain. Long before fall Lon knew that building a house this year was out of the question. After he had paid

for necessary implements and provisions, and bought a cow and brood sow, there was nothing left—even a trip home was not to be thought of.

Edna's disappointment when she learned that he would not be at home for Christmas tempted young Baxter, for the first time, to consider asking for a loan. He was half way to the railroad station, twenty miles away, with the letter to his father, before he tore it up and turned back, telling himself sharply:

"I won't begin borrowing, even with the first thing I know I'll be asking 'ol' man Goodrich' to help me out—or mortgaging my team!"

And he hugged the belief that he was suffering in a righteous cause, in spite of Edna's wounded plea: "I believe I'd sooner you'd steal the money, if you won't borrow it, rather than not to have you come home at all."

His Christmas box and the Prossers' turkey did not wipe out his keen sense of failure over the year's results. Yet the sturdy, boyish spirit could not be long depressed. Soon, sure that the coming year would bring better luck, Lon was making plans for tilling all his acreage except the slough. A first omen of good fortune came through Saul Frewitt, an old neighbor, who was now the chief merchant and stock buyer at the railway station. He offered transportation to Chicago, with a few days' stopover at home, in return for piloting a carload of hogs to the stockyards. Lon jumped at this chance.

He had never before seen a large city—but no sights could hold him, when his business was ended. He was impatiently eager, the train crawled, until the station names grew familiar. Two stops from Grindon, the banker's wife from home—he had known her all his life—entered his car. As he started to speak to her, he caught sight of his bare, chapped wrist. He was wearing the same suit of clothes he had worn away from Grindon, now shabby and outgrown. A glance told him, his hat still bore marks of his freight car journey; his overcoat was soiled and frayed. He sank back into his seat, pulling at his coat sleeves, awkward, miserable. Edna might well be ashamed of him! She was meeting well dressed men—men who could give her comforts and pleasures; while he, after two years, was coming back to her with nothing but unfulfilled promises. Panic stricken, he was the last to leave the car when the train pulled into his station.

As he came slowly down the steps, he vaguely saw familiar faces. Then, Edna was in front of him, her arms were about his neck, her lips on his. Doubt and misery were sponged out in a great, throbbing heartbeat as he gathered her close.

When he let her go, his father gripped his hand: "A welcome like that is worth comin' home to, eh, son?"

"You bet your sweet life!" It was the spontaneous outburst of a full heart. Edna laughed in sheer joy at the words.

Later, as she dabbed at the lines above his eyes, she said tenderly, "You're growing old too fast, Lon. You work too hard. It ain't fair—I ought to be out there, looking after you. Let me go back with you."

"If only I could—if I dared," he groaned, looking at her with hungry longing. She was round and supple, his Edna, with flashing lights in her eyes and flushing colors in her face. Yet there was a suggestion of fragility about her that reminded him of his mother. He shook his head. "No, Edna, I can't take you out there to that dug-out."

"You don't think I am as brave as Molly Prosser and Annie Lane?"

He had written her of Molly's gay expeditions and of Nick Lane's bride—who had brought her piano with her. It so filled their single room that Nick swore he slept doubled up, and Annie boasted that she could sit on the stool and play "Little Buttercup" and fry potatoes at the same time.

"I know you'd stand fire better than any of 'em," he cried. "It's me that's the coward! You see, I know how it might end—and they don't, yet."

"Oh," she broke out, "if only my father were like other men! He could just as well give us the money to build a house now, as let it all wait until he is gone."

"Yes. But I'd rather build my own house. I don't want to give him any show for thinking I'm marrying you for his money! And if things go right this year, I'll be ready to come for you by New Year's," he promised once again.

At home, Sam Baxter led the way to the little cubicle of the kitchen and opened the old black trunk where the family treasures had always been kept. Lon watched him lift out a dress and a shawl; his mother had worn, and take out some heavy shawls.

"Give these to Edna," his father said, "and tell her your ma wove 'em with her own hands—and this," he added a brooch that was one of Lon's earliest recollections. Then he took up a daguerrotype and opened its embossed case. The two men looked together at the clean-cut, girlish face with smooth bands of hair laid over her ears.

"Ye're the oldest, son," Baxter said in a hushed voice. "Sometimes this'll come to ye—but—I can't spare it, yet."

With new comprehension, the son laid his hand upon his father's shoulder. Presently he spoke low.

"I guess mother'd be glad if she knew I was going to marry Edna."

"Yes," the older man agreed, as he shut the trunk. "Edna's a fine woman, in spite of her relationship to the old man." Then, clutching his son's arm, he spoke out: "What are ye waitin' so long fer, Lon? Why'n't ye